

Postage for a Magical Journey

"THE STAMP COLLECTION"

BY VAL COLEMAN

By Barbara Penn

Photos by Ali Uzpervis and Peter Baiamonte



"The Stamp Collection" performed by the Sandisfield Players, directed by Ben Luxon, is one of those rare theatrical events when cast and characters, writer and director come together in such a way that the audience believes they are participating fully in the lives of the characters on stage.

The play is a jewel that in only six scenes and with that many actors totally fulfills Coleman's wish to "put my own small town on the stage and to capture that soft sweet pace and side of life in Coles County, Illinois, 1941."

While the play looks deceptively simple, it is actually complex, operating on many levels. What is truth? Does it really set us free? How do we judge and balance religion and science, life and death, war and pacifism? And while these questions inform the action of the play and its people, what makes this play grip our heart is how it works on the level any great play must work on, the connections and the believability of its characters. And work it does, a credit to its writer and to the deft hand of director Luxon.

The play takes place in the summer of 1941 in a small town in rural Illinois, just before the US entry into the Second World War. It is set in Shirley Trimble's living room, also an antique shop, filled, as Coleman says, "with all manner of treasures." Coleman, portraying rumpold "old" Beverly Reynolds, 65-year-old poet and professor, sits in the apron of the stage, the spotlight on him at each transition between scenes. The character provides the glue, the bridge between the action on stage and the memories of old Beverly's childhood. Coleman is pitch perfect.

The plot revolves around Olga Trimble (played by Tina Sotis), who is battling an incurable form of hemophilia, "Christmas disease," and her husband Shirley (played by Adam Manacher) who persists in his belief that the right doctor will cure her -- and in the meantime, he will make things light and happy to give her hope. Sitting at Olga's side is Mrs. Eliza Quigley (played by Mary Ann Grammer), a Christian Scientist who feels that only by finding the truth through "Christ the scientist" and hearing his words read to her will Olga be healed.

Into this summer and this antique shop comes 10-year-old Beverly Reynolds (Gabe Lassar) who, in exchange for the promise of receiving a priceless album of American stamps (the Stamp Collection of the title), has promised to sit with Olga for the summer. Also comes the town undertaker, Harry Usher (Charles Fidler), who wants to set up a "Slumber Room" at his mortuary by buying most of the furniture in the antique shop. Dorothee Reynolds (Jean Atwater-Williams) as Beverly's mother opens the play and sets it in motion.

The individual worlds, hopes, dreams, and fears of the characters are shown through the metaphor of the Stamp Collection, as Coleman says, a "magical book ... full of enchantment, spells and charms ... the tiny pictures are its secret." Hidden in these small engravings are all of history, mysterious places like the majesty of Niagara Falls and the vast blue of the Pacific Ocean, and people as diverse as Jefferson Davis and black dancers.

In lesser hands than Luxon's, this play might have drifted into melodrama or emotional knee-jerk responses, but in his hands and those of Coleman the characters

are understood so profoundly that they become entirely sympathetic and real.

On one level, this is a play about and even a plea for pacifism, with Olga's bleeding a symbol for the futile shedding of blood in wartime; a symbol also of the blood that Christ, the Prince of Peace, shed to save us. When she looks at a stamp of an American soldier of the Great War, Olga is everywoman as she recalls, "When Shirley got to France they had forgotten why they were fighting ... At Christmastime the soldiers stood up in the trenches and held tiny Christmas trees above their heads, and for a time, the killing stopped. They had forgotten why they went to war."

But, to me, it is also and primarily a play about love, the love and connection between these human beings.

About the Production

The period atmosphere was beautifully captured in the set, in the lighting by Abbie Lombard, and the sound (music on the phonograph, Olga's voice reading her letter at the end) by Jerry Herman. The entire cast performed uniformly at a such a high level of skill that one could forget this is an amateur theatre group.

Jean Atwater-Williams as Beverly's mother reminds us that the impact of a role is not measured by its duration. Through her skills and ability to capture character, and attention to details down to her 1940s dress and seamed stockings, she transports us to the magic time and place in only about 24 lines, setting the stage for the period and feeling that follows. Atwater-Williams always delivers, and she delivers brilliantly here.

Mary Ann Grammer as Mrs. Quigley has taken a character who might have been rigid and stiff and made her sympathetic. Her exchanges with Harry Usher the undertaker (Charles Fidler) on their very different views of life and death are played with humor and gentleness. The audience felt that despite their differences, they like one another. Grammer, like Atwater-Williams, is a pro and here she shines.

Adam Manacher as Shirley Reynolds was a delight. His command of movement and voice is remarkable. In the second scene he dons a huge red nose and orange hair to become Sarsaparilla the Clown hoping to bring a smile to Olga's lips. In addition to complete control of the character, he has complete control of juggling a set of balls. Great work in a tour-de-force scene of humor and warmth.

Gabe Lassar as the 10-year-old Beverly was perfect, refreshingly natural and not at all actorly. His body language and demeanor were convincing as a young boy of the 1940s. I'm sure we will see much more from this young actor in the future.

Special praise goes to Tina Sotis and Charles Fidler.

As Olga, onstage for almost the whole 80 minutes, Sotis must carry the play's believability and she did it seamlessly. The deepening bond between her and young Beverly extended to the audience, and we sensed the growing tenderness and love between them. As Beverly said near the end of the play when his parents, aware of Olga's dire condition, forbade him to return to the antique shop, "How could they possibly know





the magical things that Mrs. Trimble and I have shared? How could they know that I was becoming a brand-new, different person?" Sotis moves between humor and poignancy effortlessly. The death scene, a challenge for any actor, is handled well. Sotis is coming into the star we saw the seeds of in her first roles with the Sandisfield Players. Brava.

Charles Fidler is an actors' actor. As Harry Usher, the undertaker, he was flawless delivering humorous lines and putting across a wonderfully realized character who could have been a caricature. He commanded the stage, sweeping us up in his role. In every performance I have seen him in, he has been perfect – delightful, compelling, magical. It is a privilege to be in the audience when this man is on stage. Particularly poignant was his exchange with Beverly as he looks up from a clipper ship stamp to describe a real ship going to sea. We see in his face, and feel, the longing and perhaps regret of his not going to sea as a young man. When he looks out at the audience and says to Beverly, "There she is, comin' at you," we see the ship too.

Ultimately this is a play about time and its illusions, time recalled and time lived, converging in memory. The play ends with young Beverly reading a letter Olga left for him after her passing, asking him to someday write her a letter in reply. With the spotlight returning to him, Val Coleman

closed the play in a very moving moment by turning to the audience and saying, "This play is that letter."

And this play is like looking at a diamond held up to the light and seeing in its netting all of the hidden connections, each point reflecting all the others. To Val Coleman, poet, playwright, social activist, philosopher, and ruffled, brilliant guy, what an achievement. Congratulations. We are so lucky to have you, your talent and insight, in our midst. ♡



BEAUTIFUL AND HONEST

The play filled the Art Center for both performances, July 8 and 9. Afterward, director Ben Luxon wrote to his cast: "What a memorable few weeks this has been and I would like to thank you all for the work you did in bringing Val's lovely play totally to life and to congratulate you all for delivering what I think were the best possible performances you could have given at this time. ... Your performances and characterizations were worthy of a professional stage. ... The actors ultimately have the responsibility to bring [a play] to life and once again I thank you all for achieving this so beautifully and honestly."

